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Claire Denis' Capitalist *Bastards*

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Abstract:

The films of Claire Denis consistently make global systems visible, and do so in ways that are seductively sensory. This article analyses Denis' film *Bastards* as a queasily affective staging of contemporary capitalism's gendered hostility. It draws both on politically-engaged theories of contemporary cinema and on the insights of affect theory to understand the film's close imbrication of financial control and sexual exploitation. *Bastards* is almost entirely set in Paris, but it refers outward to Denis' earlier films of transnational circulation, using Michel Subor's performance as a monstrous exploiter as a point of commonality. The article analyses the figure of the 'salaud' in French culture, reading Subor's character Laporte through Sartre. It goes on to examine how the class qualities of the 'salaud' seep beyond character and out across the film text. What emerges is a threatening mise-en-scène that evokes the hostile condition of contemporary capitalism in its articulation of time, space, and affect. Gender becomes the focus for this hostility, where economic relations are played out across the body of the sexually tortured daughter Justine. The article asks what kinds of resistance are imaginable in this oppressive milieu.

Keywords:

Denis, capitalism, gender, sensation, hostility

Bio:

Rosalind Galt is a Reader in Film Studies at King's College London. Her publications include *Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image* (Columbia UP, 2011), *The New European Cinema: Redrawing the Map* (Columbia UP, 2006) and *Global Art Cinema: New Theories and Histories* (OUP, 2010). Her research addresses European and world cinemas and issues of politics, aesthetics, gender and sexuality.

“Claire Denis’ Capitalist *Bastards*”

The films of Claire Denis consistently make global systems visible, and do so in ways that are at once violently obvious and seductively sensory. Thus, it is evident that *White Material* (2010) speaks about postcolonial violence and *35 rhums / 35 Shots of Rum* (2008) about the globality of Parisian networks, but at the same time these films bring into visibility intimate forms of social relations that escape such easy narration. This contiguity of global systems with cinematic sensation is clear from the indelible scene in Denis’s first feature *Chocolat* (1988) in which Protée tricks France into scalding her hand on a hot pipe by pretending that it is not hot, more seriously injuring his own hand in the process. The scene can be read as an allegory of colonial relationality, but it also institutes a discourse on the violent proximities of trust and domestic intimacy that speaks through cinema’s affective register. The spectator’s visceral response to burned skin binds together the bodies in the audience with those on-screen. Across her films, from *Chocolat* to *Bastards / Les Salauds* (2013), Denis deploys both the weight and the fragility of filmed bodies to figure the less visible wounds of global politics.

However, even as Denis’ films interrogate the circulatory mechanisms and power dynamics of global capital, their complex aesthetics and often fragmentary narration work to present obstacles to that very circulation. Where many contemporary directors of art cinema aspire to smooth global circulation of their films, Denis’ work is strangely resistant to these flows. One index of this resistance is distribution: she may be a scholarly and critical darling, but her films are often given much narrower release than those of her contemporaries. According to Box Office Mojo, *Bastards* had a US total

gross of just over \$25,000 which is dramatically lower than other notable art films of the year such as *The Great Beauty* / *La grande bellezza* (Sorrentino, 2013), which took almost \$3 million or *Blue is the Warmest Colour* / *La Vie d'Adèle* (Kechiche, 2013) with over \$2 million. Box office statistics are usually read as an indicator of success or failure, but these numbers can also offer a brute indicator of Denis' refusal to fit into a particular model of capitalist cinema. Another, rather different, index of resistance is her status as auteur. As much critical literature on her films notes (e.g. Mayne, 2005; Beugnet, 2004), Denis works in an unusually collaborative fashion with writer Jean-Pól Fargeau, director of photography Agnès Godard and musicians the Tindersticks. Her recurring cast of actors creates intertextual links across the films, but these collaborations also distribute authorship in significant ways. Denis insists on a practice that resists masculinist auteurist norms at the same time as qualifying dominant modes of production.

In this article, I focus on *Bastards* in order to consider how Denis' films default—both formally and institutionally—on the promise of cinema to construct capitalist images. Instead of reproducing the visual regimes that naturalise existing social relations, Denis' films construct other kinds of images. These image regimes (and the films' resonant soundscapes) begin to explain why her films are so intensely affective and yet do not fit easily into the circuits of world cinema. *Bastards*, I will argue, uses an intensely sensory form as a queasily affective staging of contemporary capitalism's gendered hostility. Both politically-engaged theories of contemporary cinema and on the insights of affect theory are required to understand the film's close imbrication of financial control and sexual exploitation. Denis' films have always explored the experiential linkages of gender and global power; the ways in which the (female) body is made to feel, to act and

to signify as part of world systems. Nowhere is this tension between the material and the symbolic more palpable than in *Bastards*, which I argue sets up an intimate nomenclature of capital.

Bastards opened to atypically mixed reviews. *The Hollywood Reporter* called it “cold and brutal” and “easier to admire than to love” (May 21, 2013). Xan Brooks in the *Guardian* said it “intrigues more than it actually delivers” (February 13, 2014), and the *Village Voice* called it “undercooked” (October 23, 2013). These critiques speak to two aspects of the film: its elliptical noirish plot and its sensational subject matter. Both qualities will be of relevance to this analysis. *Bastards* can be thought of as something of a dark version of *Vendredi Soir / Friday Night* (2002), which is also set in Paris, and which also stars Vincent Lindon as a sexually compelling masculine figure. It opens with the suicide of a bankrupt shoe factory owner, and turns into a failed revenge thriller as Marco (played by Lindon), the dead man’s brother-in-law, leaves his life as a tanker captain and returns to Paris to help his bereaved sister Sandra (Julie Bataille). It seems that shady financier Eduarde Laporte (Michel Subor) has something to do with the death, as the business was deeply in debt to him. However, things are complicated by Sandra’s daughter Justine (Lola Créton), who was discovered naked and bleeding on the streets of Paris at the time of the suicide. Justine has been sexually abused and tortured, possibly also by Laporte, and Marco’s investigation is aimed at rescuing Justine as well as avenging the dead man. Of course, it turns out that nothing is quite as it seems and the revenge mission goes completely awry. This story of debt and financial ruin centres a much more pervasive space of economic degradation, in which sexual violence provides the very foundation of social relations.

The figure of the salaud

I want to begin analysing *Bastards* with the figure of the bastard. The word ‘salaud’ is richly textured in French, connoting not only a villain or swine, but something dirty, disgusting and abject. This sensory repulsion will prove significant. Firstly, though, it is important to note that the word reminds a Francophone audience inexorably of Jean-Paul Sartre’s deployment of it to describe a particular mode of bad faith characterised by denying freedom to others. In *La nausée*, the bastard buys his own freedom at the expense of others and, in an oft-cited scene, the book’s protagonist Roquentin articulates his contempt for a series of portraits of bourgeois officials by addressing them as salauds. (1938, 134) Sartre returns to the figure of the salaud, most famously in *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, in which he defines the term thus: “Those who conceal from themselves this total freedom, under the guise of solemnity, or by making determinist excuses, I will call cowards. Others, who try to prove their existence is necessary, when man’s appearance on earth is merely contingent – I will call bastards [salauds].” (1996, 71; 2007, 49) Through the influence of Sartre, the salaud plays a significant role in the philosophical constitution of the subject in postwar French thought, a role that places the foundational logics of the bourgeois polity under particular pressure.

Elevated social status and coercive political conditions are the natural habitat of the bastard. As Michèle Lamont puts it in her sociological study of the French haut bourgeoisie, the salaud is “one who lacks intellectual honesty and who is ready to sacrifice the interests of others to his own by repressing them politically or by being blatantly unfair to them if necessary...The salaud shows no group of class solidarity...the

salaud thinks that his money gives him unlimited right and the power to act arbitrarily toward the meek.” (1992, 30-31) Beyond these intimations of class attitudes, salaud becomes an increasingly popular term after Sartre. Insofar as Google Ngram provides a rough and ready perspective on linguistic trends, we can note a spectacular growth in the term since 1900, with sharp spikes in the 1940s and 2000s. (Of course, swearing in print grows more generally through the twentieth century, but use of salaud is significantly higher than the English bastard.) The term is used in postwar discourse, for example, to refer to the bad faith of collaborators in World War II. We see this usage appear in responses to Louis Malle’s 1974 film *Lacombe, Lucien*. In a *Jeune Cinéma* review (March 1974), Jean Delmas memorably dismisses the film as “the sentimental recuperation of a bastard” and Jean-Louis Bory’s *Nouvel Observateur* review (January 28, 1974) is entitled “Servitudes et misères d’un salaud”. The bastard is not merely a colloquial insult, then, but a figure of some political import. In *Les Salauds*, the figure of the bastard links cinematic vision with exploitative social relations and the film stages the bastard as an affective lens through which to view and to think capital.

The primary bastard in *Bastards* is Michel Subor’s financier Laporte, an intensely sinister character who seems to know everything that happens in the film. Subor plays more or less the same character that he plays in Denis’ earlier film *L’Intrus / The Intruder* (2004). In that film he was Louis Trébor, a questionable businessman with fake Swiss and Ukrainian passports, who acquires an illegal heart transplant in Korea and searches for his lost son in French Polynesia. In *Bastards*, Marco looks up information on Laporte online, and we see on a mocked-up version of the *Guardian* that he owns property in Paris, Europe, Russia, and the French Polynesian Islands – essentially the same places as

Trébor. In *The Intruder*, Trébor is a monstrous figure, who sees his family literally as human resources, like the globalised world, as material to be mined for his personal gain. In *Bastards*, Marco's research reveals rumours of financial impropriety, introducing Laporte as a powerful figure whose wealth may be built on fraud. Although Laporte is clearly a different person from Trébor, *Bastards'* textual referencing of the earlier figure blurs the distinctions between the two characters, suggesting both a continuum of global exploitation and, as we shall see, a bleeding of edges in which the qualities of the bastard do not stop at the limits of fictional characters.

Although it is set almost entirely in Paris, the film nonetheless evokes the global finanscapes, to use Arjun Appadurai's (1996) terminology, that underlie Laporte's wealth. His lavishly furnished 'Hausmannian' apartment in the 9th arrondissement, his limousine and his son's exclusive private school all speak of the accumulation of capital in the hands of the few. In one scene, we see him on an airport runway, conducting business alongside his private jet. The Silvestri family hold a different position in this circulatory system, but one no less dependent on global capital flows. Even Marco, who went to sea to escape the family business, has merely swapped one version of global capital for another. As the captain of a container ship his job is distant from domesticity but it visibly enables the international flow of wealth. We first encounter him in the transnational space of the ship, where the crew speak different languages, listen to North African music and use English as a lingua franca. Marco's freedom from the strictures of French bourgeois life requires him, nonetheless, to manage the material processes of globalized commerce. When a phone call summons him home we glimpse a desert landscape, an anywhere of rapid development in the Global South. Where *The Intruder*

renders visible globalisation's circuits of exploitation, *Bastards* draws this analysis back into the metropolitan cityscape of Paris. In Eduarde Laporte, Denis suggests a transnational continuity of bastards.

Trébor in *The Intruder* provides a precedent for *Bastards*' linkage of financial and familial violence. In addition to demonstrating the raced and gendered substratum of French neocolonial economics in his business dealings, Trébor murders his own son for his heart. Laporte also pushes financial and intimate crimes queasily into proximity, extending the patriarchal logic of the economic bastard. Here, however, the gendered logic of financial control is brought to the forefront, with sexual coercion emerging as the very currency of capital. Laporte is first actually seen in a very dark shot, getting into bed with his mistress Raphaëlle (Chiara Mastroianni), holding hands with her so we think it's an intimate romantic moment. He then surprises the spectator by demanding crudely that she jerk him off—the imperative to sexually service him makes bluntly obvious the transactional nature of their relationship. We don't actually see him again for almost an hour, during which time he becomes a shadowy and potentially dangerous figure, a puppet-master manipulating Raphaëlle and Marco's family both sexually and financially. When we do encounter him again, it is an ominous scene in which Laporte has invited Marco in for coffee and the spectator is drawn to conclude that he knows that Marco is investigating him. The scene's slow temporality makes us notice the power relations of Raphaëlle submissively bringing Laporte first coffee and then water, punctuated by her panicky text exhorting Marco to get out. But the scene's effect of anxiety is centred on the quiet menace of Subor's performance. He leans an elbow casually on the apartment's grand mantelpiece, his gaze doubled in a large mirror, mockingly overdetermining both

patriarchal power and duplicity. The spectator is left in no doubt that he knows exactly what Marco and Raphaëlle are doing. As the narrative unfolds, his bastardliness becomes visible: he kidnaps his child with Raphaëlle to punish her for having sex with Marco, and, it finally transpires, he controls a sex-trafficking, incest porn business, trading not only in sexual exploitation but in the murky pleasures of destroyed trust and degraded social bonds. The reference to *La nausée* is particularly redolent because Laporte evokes a queasy sensation in the spectator. As the plot's central bastard, he enables the figuration of a system, a cartoonishly powerful patriarch who embodies everything that is brutal and oppressive about the intersection of family structures and transnational capital.

As the plural in the title implies, though, Laporte is not the only figure of the bastard in *Bastards*. As the narrative progresses, it turns out that many characters could be considered as such. When Raphaëlle goes in tears to Marco's apartment, blaming him for Laporte taking away her son, Marco insists that she instead blame Laporte, exhorting over and over "*He's the bastard.*" Clearly, Laporte is to blame for his actions, but Marco's insistence reveals his anxiety that he might not be as righteous as he imagines. What if Marco is the bastard for using Raphaëlle sexually? Not long after this scene, Raphaëlle shoots and kills Marco when he fights Laporte. When push comes to shove, she protects the powerful, becoming another figure of bastardliness. Worst of all are Justine's parents, whom we have been falsely led to see as victims. The film is framed by the father: we see him soon-to-be-dead in the opening shots and then again in the closing ones, this time in the sex video that forms a final scenario of horror. In the video, Justine walks with her father and Laporte, then takes part in a sexual scene with both of her parents. It thus transpires that the dead father is one of the story's major bastards, and the

mother is also party to this horrific sexual abuse. The entire family structure is implicated in bastardly behaviour, particularly if we think of the connotations of salauds as disgusting, immoral, dirty or contemptible.

This proliferation of bastards, however, is not merely characterological. Laporte embodies exploitative economic relations, but the incorporation of these relations in the bodily performance of Subor is only a temporary repository for a much more diffuse and all-encompassing assemblage of capitalist threat. The filmed body is here not so much a mode of humanist representation as a site of force and a perceptible condensation of structural power. Steven Shaviro approaches something similar in his reading of Olivier Assayas, who, like Denis, uses film form to interrogate the pressures and violences of the world system. Assayas, for Shaviro, “makes films that are at the same time inhuman in their icy distance, and yet intimate, visceral, and creepy, in the way they offer us vulnerable body-images, and organize themselves around microperceptions of corporeal affect.” (2010, 39) Denis is in some ways a very different filmmaker, but *Bastards* works on precisely that tension between the distance of power and the proximity of bodily frailty. We can see this formal mechanism at work in the shots of Laporte in the video, on-camera, naked and touching himself. Narratively this stripping bare should make him seem weaker, exposed as just another punter, but as a formal strategy of incorporation, it’s precisely the slippage from penis to phallus that his body stages. What we see isn’t so much a middle-aged man’s overweight body and unresponsive penis. What we see is the nakedly abusive practice of phallic power.

This patriarchal threat diffuses across the screen, escaping the bounds of Laporte’s physical and narrative being. Elena del Rio gets at this dispersive quality of Denis’ style

in her analysis of *Beau Travail* (1999), about which she writes that the film creates “an affective realm that goes beyond subjectivity and character to involve the film body as a sensation-producing machine. It is as if the film were sending ripples of affect and thought across a diversity of its moments.” (2008, 160) In *Beau Travail* many of these sensations are more pleasurable, or at least ambivalent, but in *Bastards* the ripple is a shudder convulsing the film. When Raphaëlle first enters Marco’s apartment, there’s a disjunctive and ultimately fictional flashforward to a scene in which she is searching for her missing son along with a search party and finds his bike. The bright yellow bike abandoned in slick forest-green foliage, her arm reaching from out of frame into harsh light to grasp this remnant of the child, stages a nightmarish tableau reminiscent of one of Cindy Sherman’s more grotesque photographs. The bike suggests that violence has been done to the child, and the sequence threatens Raphaëlle with anguish and loss. Thus, the threat of taking away her son (which Laporte eventually does—though not violently) is already figured, emerging as a vision without origin or agency into the diegesis, when she so much as hints at a relationship with Marco. Laporte’s logic of acquiescence ensured with threats of violence appears to control the diegesis here, or rather his bastardly threat to her child appears even outside of what he as a character could reasonably know. Bastardliness spreads across film surface, breaking out of diegetic time and space into blooms of hostility.

Hostility and the image

Del Rio draws on Deleuze’s time-image (1989) to analyse the films of Claire Denis, but I propose that we need to add a different reading of Deleuze to understand fully the

hostility that suffuses *Bastards*. Louis-Georges Schwartz's concept of Cinema Hostis (2013) offers a particularly productive way of thinking this figuration of bastardliness and capitalism. Schwartz proposes Hostis as the successor to Deleuze's time-image, as a new form of image with hostility as its determining feature. He argues, "At the turn of the twenty first century, Cinema Hostis emerged, subordinating movement and time to hostility... Like cinema's other image regimes, the emergence of the new image was determined by economic changes, specifically transformations of the relation between labor and capital." For Schwartz, the economic and political restructurings of the 1970s instantiate a relationship between labour and capital that forecloses completely on the possibility of working-class belonging or revolutionary subjectivity. Placed in the situation that Giorgio Agamben calls bare life (1998), the proletariat lacks all protection from the state and the logic of the market penetrates all areas of life. Thus, "By the turn of the century, economic activity had entirely replaced the social, and the economy has never been anything but a form of hostility."

Schwartz argues that by the time Deleuze published the Cinema books, the time image was already undergoing the kind of hollowing out that had ended the movement image forty years earlier. Thus, "The leading definitional edge of cinema has always been the development of *techniques* for making social reproduction thinkable," and his examples of this new hostile image include the Dardennes' *Rosetta* (1999), Philippe Grandrieux's *La Vie nouvelle / A New Life* (2002), and Peter Watkins's *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (2000), which use various techniques to figure the hostility of capitalist social relations. I propose that *Bastards* also subordinates movement and time to hostility, and indeed that Claire Denis' work forms a particularly sustained engagement with the

hostile condition of contemporary transnational capital. There is no possibility of action—Marco crosses the ocean to save his family, only to be unceremoniously killed—nor do we have a modernist temporality, the kind of slowness that constructs intensified subjectivity. Instead, the film is formed out of a fragmented pattern in which every relationship is ultimately hostile and where film form stages modes of hostile looking and feeling.

The irruption of the fictional flashforward is one such node of hostility – we can attribute it transitively to Laporte, but it's more accurate to say that 'Laporte' is a congealed form of the film's distributed hostile visuality. Consider how Raphaëlle is repeatedly threatened with losing her child. The bike scene makes this threat explicit but the recurring shots of her dropping the boy off at school turn a quotidian act into a site of social hostility. Why are we seeing this every day? Is something going to happen? As with the video images from Michael Haneke's *Caché / Hidden* (2005), the camera locates the spectator uncomfortably, at once on the side of menace and its target. However, where *Caché* operates on the narrative assumption that a specific (if unknown) person is filming, *Bastards* turns the trope of surveillance into a general principle of living under intimidation. The threat is substantiated when Raphaëlle goes to the school only to find that Joseph has already been removed by his father. She is forced to take his friend home for an anxious afternoon eating an inappropriately cheerful baby blue cake, until a courier arrives with a letter announcing "from now on Joseph will live with me." Familial relations have been replaced in an instant with a hostile takeover.

Of course, the visual logics of voyeurism and surveillance have always fascinated cinema, a history not unrelated to the medium's development of capitalist, gendered and

colonial regimes of vision. But whereas these dominant gazes conventionally bolster subjectivity and locate the spectator on the side of power, *Bastards* reveals the stakes of a contemporary visual regime in which the spectator is constantly subject to a diffuse and menacing look. This distributed hostility is at play throughout the film. A phone video of the child on a boat looks like a proof of life message sent by a kidnapper (which is kind of is), turning innocent performance into insidious mediation. Laporte calls Raphaëlle exactly as she is kissing Marco in their building's stairway. The film proceeds *as if* he were watching, although he couldn't possibly be, instilling the sensation of distant and dangerous surveillance as a condition of both human intimacy and cinematic temporality. This regime of hostility can be entirely abstract, as in the repeated overhead shots, looking down toward the street from the apartment window. We see cars parked and arriving, people entering and exiting the building. Notably, we see Laporte arrive with another man. On one level these are just point of view shots from an apartment window, a staging of urban life in which the film constructs a quotidian view of who comes and goes in an apartment building. But at the same time, these shots place the spectator in an anxious viewpoint of surveillance, similar to the shots of the school gate, watching actions that seem to be significant but in which she cannot intervene. Time is anxious here. Someone is always watching and the look is never idle. We hover anxiously between the subject and object of this gaze, an ambivalence that is, in itself, disturbing.

Martine Beugnet says that, "Like desire, the violence at play in Denis' films is of a complex, hybrid nature...It is the violence exerted on the individual who not only has to don a predefined identity, but does so in order to fit into a system of value rendered absurd by the disappearance of ideals." (2004, 42) She is talking about *Beau Travail* here,

but the claim on how violence, subjectivity, and social systems are intertwined speaks equally well to *Bastards*. Marco, Raphaëlle and Justine are all nodal points in an exploitative and ultimately threatening social space. Much of the film's hostility is aimed at Marco, since he is the protagonist, and through him at the spectator. When he investigates the country barn in which the sexual abuse took place, he is visually threatened by imposing lorries, which loom out of the darkness toward him as he crosses the road. There's no real threat here, no homicidal truck driver. The shot illustrates how threat is distributed across the mise-en-scène, a function of cinematic form rather than narrated via character agency or causality. The film's entire hallucinatory aesthetic creates this sensation of uncertain menace: it minimises clarity of narration in favour of an ominous tone that thrives on anxious bodily affect. Back at Marco's apartment, he is physically beaten, and we are placed up close, spitting blood into the sink. When hostility and violence do burst forth, the film holds the spectator close to its corporeal effects. We are always proximate to blood and violence, precarious in our subjectivity.

Gendered hostility

The film's most significant arena of hostility, of course, is gender relations and it unflinchingly enacts hostility on the body of Justine, the sexually tortured daughter. For Denis, economic relations are always played out across the bodies of women. The film opens with two images of violence: the father's suicide and a more disturbing sequence of Justine walking naked through the streets, dark blood running down thickly between her legs. What exactly has happened to her? The image is overdetermined with discourses of purity attached to the naked young woman (another coagulation of capitalist meaning,

like Tiqqun's supposedly not gendered figure of the jeune fille [2012]), and the anxiety provoked by the blood's suggestion of rape, punctured bodily integrity, and of course patriarchal intimations of uncleanness and soiled goods. A medium close up of Justine's midsection ensures that we look—really see—her bleeding body. *Bastards* piles on the implications of this misogynist violence in a starkly worded scene where Justine's doctor (Alex Descas, another regular actor with Denis whose presence adds weight to this small role) explains to Marco that they may need to operate to repair her vagina. Immediately after this encounter, he meets with the family accountant who urges his sister to declare bankruptcy. Laporte, it seems, bailed the family out of debt but demanded something in return. Sandra says "That bastard turned her into his sex object." Her hostility deflects the film's more systemic accusation of bastardliness: financial and sexual exploitation are combined and both are implicated in Justine's ruin.

Again, gendered hostility is not limited to character actions but seeps across the entire mise-en-scene. Beugnet writes that in Denis' films, "Inanimate objects, textures, surfaces and colours as well as bodies are described in detail through camerawork that plays on the defamiliarising effect of scale as well as on framing" (2004, 138). She is referring to Denis' staging of sexuality, which can be sensually liberating, but her evocation of gender and sex always have the potential to tip queasily into threat as they do here. In one scene, Marco visits the family factory where he sees an abandoned pile of women's court shoes. Each shoe contains a laste, a prop to keep its shape, while the heels themselves are designed to operate as props to help a woman keep her 'proper' shape in patriarchy. On the floor they have lost shape and have become instead a formless, abject heap of ugly mustard and cerise. Beugnet's reference to the defamiliarising effects of

scale is a propos, but this image turns inside out the erotics of feminine attire. The shoes are shapes without women, gendered forms turned formless. The image replete with scattered and piled up shoes figures bankruptcy and the breakdown of the factory; the fetish objects so forlornly upended stage the precarity and debt that have led to the family's economic ruin, while they simultaneously recall the implication of the family business in shaping women's bodies. As we will find out, the violent moulding of women into acceptably exploitative femininity is not just business but also pleasure for this family. Hostility takes a different form in this scene, in which the shoes are merely a taste of the bodily deformation yet to emerge.

Justine cannot cope with the physical and psychological abuse she has endured and, in an intense, fantasmatic sequence, she crashes the car in which she's joyriding with some of her former abusers. This emotionally intense scene revisits some of the textural qualities of *35 Shots of Rum*, in particular the late-night bar scene in that film in which new intimacies take place. Both deploy close-ups on faces and hands, paying attention to skin emerging from darkness, to evoke tactility and the affective weight of touching other people. But whereas the earlier film finds hope for contact outside the temporality of capital, *Bastards* enmeshes Justine in its machinery. Again, the film's hypnotic aesthetic form stages hostility more clearly than any narration: the close-ups and heavy musical score in the scene seem to promise intimacy and outlaw energy but in fact signal only Justine's desperation and the impossibility, for her, of this apparatus leading anywhere but death. It makes narrative sense for Justine to commit suicide, but the shots of the aftermath create not empathy but an unsettling tableau of mangled metal. The camera's gaze on the scene is implacable, neutral, uncomfortable. The crash site is a feminist

revisioning of Godard's *Weekend* (1967) and Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996); like *Weekend*, a distanced perspective on a fatal car crash proposes a political critique and as in *Crash*, the sight of mangled wreckage provides a hard stare into a horrifying Real. For *Bastards*, the move from the intense interiority of Justine's point of view to the pointed neutrality of the crash tableau offers insight into the apparatus of patriarchy that feels only hostility toward young women.

What has broken Justine is revealed in the final sequence, which finally plays the video of her being violated with a corn cob and by her parents. But the film prepares us for this core of misogynist hostility throughout, with a series of images that use colour and texture as visual strategies to suffuse the screen with sexual threat. In an early scene, Marco visits the barn owned by Justine's supposed friends, and finds a sleazy red bed and camera set up. Glaring red light suggests a brothel and the striking compositions focus our attention on the colour-saturated materialities of this tawdry locale. Here we first see the bloody corn cob, at this point a mysterious object. It's dark but Denis and Godard's use of digital cinematography allows us to pick out both the shiny red-black kernels and a painterly arrangement of cream and red splotches on the husk. This red-black colour recurs in the friend's red nail polish, which looks like Chanel's iconic rouge noir, a shade designed to look like dried blood. (There's a lot to say, of course, about the intersections of the commodity fetish and the sexual fetish in rouge noir.) The colour evokes both the femme fatale and a more modern aesthetic milieu: its most famous use in cinema, as Pamela Church Gibson points out (2012), is Uma Thurman's character in *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994). Here, by contrast, the fingernails are cropped childishly short, and there's a pile up of associations in this colour and shape—innocence combined with

vampiness, knowing sexuality, a play with violence that turns out to be all too real. The red walls reference a cinematic history of villainous lairs and womb-like basements. Dark red bleeds through the mise-en-scene—the next scene is in a hospital waiting room which is also red, continuing the intimations of violence into a supposedly safe space.

Hostility seems to play out differently when gender is at stake—the distance of surveillance is swamped by the bloody violences of touch. From the shoes to the car crash to the corn cob, objects form signifiers of sexual violence and exploitation across the film's mise-en-scène. Schwartz's account of Cinema Hostis includes Grandrieux's *La Vie nouvelle*, another film in which an aesthetic of tactility and proximity stages scenes of sexual violence. In an early scene of that film, a pimp brutally shears a woman's hair with a hunting knife, the closely-miked sounds of the blade ripping through hair and her laboured breathing creating a painful intimacy. These examples suggest that the hostility of contemporary capitalism toward women requires sensory articulation, and a deployment of intense cinematic affect that plays with the already gendered forms of exploitation, melodrama and sensationalism. In the case of *Bastards*, critics accused Denis of sensationalism (see, for example *Indiewire*'s May 21, 2013 Cannes review) but it might be more accurate to say that the film works on the aesthetic and political relationships between sensation and sensationalism.

The film's plot refers explicitly to William Faulkner's 1931 novel *Sanctuary* (2011), including the central trope of a man returning to the family home, the complex intimacies of sexual abuse and, crucially, a female character being raped with a corn cob. Denis is known for her loose yet evocative reworkings of source texts—*Beau Travail*'s revision of *Billy Budd* is the best-known example—and what she reiterates from

Sanctuary is both the unforgettable materiality of the corn as weapon and the structure of a melodrama in which brutality and injustice are unceasing. But *Sanctuary* is far from the film's only point of reference. Implicitly, it alludes to contemporaneous news stories of sex trafficking in France as well as to the Dominique Strauss-Kahn rape case which placed the relationship between sexual violence and political power at the centre of French public discourse. (For a feminist analysis of the case, see Rouyer, 2013.) In addition Laporte's victim Justine is surely an echo of Sade's *Justine* (1791), another innocent violently raped and abused in familial settings. Given Sade's prominence in critical and often feminist debate on modernity, sexuality and ethics, this reference point also echoes deeply. At once Justine speaks of literary sensation and sadistic bodily sensations, of censorship and the value of transgressive representation, and of the bodily violences inherent in patriarchal politics. Given the Sartrean significance of Laporte as a *salaud*, we might well read Justine through Simone de Beauvoir and a trajectory of feminist ethics most notably taken up by Judith Butler (Beauvoir, 1972; Butler, 2003 and 2005). Is the libertine's freedom the same as the bastard's bad faith? Whether or not we burn Sade, Justine figures the liberties patriarchy takes with women.

In light of these mediatised discourses on the representation of sensational violence against women—in melodrama, literature, pornography, news media, philosophy—it becomes all the more striking that *Bastards* insists on showing the video of Justine's abuse. The audience have known about the existence of the video for some time and may assume the film will delicately withhold the act at the heart of the drama. Instead, the film culminates brutally, placing the spectator into the uncomfortable role of pornographic voyeur. It doesn't let the audience off the hook—for Denis, those who criticise the ending

as exploitative would simply prefer not to see their own exploitation reflected back at them. Such aggressive formal tactics recall the transgressive cinéma du corps (Beugnet, 2007; Palmer, 2011), but the point of this degradation exceeds literary, journalistic or cinematic referentiality. Rather, it proposes a form of imaging that can adequate the sensorium of hostility. In this account of patriarchal capitalist exploitation, there is no saviour and no escape. The hostility of *Bastards* figures neoliberal power dynamics that might seem distant from the haute bourgeois world of the 9th arrondissement in which much of the narrative takes place. Whereas films like *Rosetta* more directly narrate economic precarity, *Bastards* works at the level of cinematic form to evoke the sickly sensation of entrapment, exploitation and having absolutely nothing left to lose. Social reproduction here is the sickest of jokes. That there is no way out is precisely the point: familial bonds are no more than the most intimately effective form of exploitation.

Gestures of resistance

Denis is part of what Martin O'Shaughnessy (2011) has argued is a significant resistance to neoliberalism in contemporary French cinema, and it is noteworthy that Schwartz's proposal of cinema hostis begins with three French or Francophone films. Denis' films can be positioned at an intersection between strands of politically-engaged filmmaking and cinemas of sensation; in critical terms, these tendencies map onto Marxist accounts of cinema in neoliberalism and phenomenologically-oriented theories of cinema, affect and the haptic. Her work refuses to separate these impulses, engaging in a resistance to global systems of exploitation that is routed insistently through the body. Thus, we can read Denis' recent films as both resistant to the dominant narratives, forms

and circulatory mechanisms of global neoliberalism and as articulating these concerns through the sensory intensities of the cinematic. For example, *35 Shots of Rum* both speaks explicitly about Third World debt and the difficulty of breathing in this world, and offers resistance by way of a mise-en-scène of stoppages and deflections, a refusal of proper narrative pathways in favour of the intimate lifeworlds opened up when capitalist time is thwarted. *The Intruder* is even more explicit in its critique of global circulations of capital, but it counters Subor's monstrous father with a richly fragmentary and allusive set of images of elsewhere. In these films, Denis' refusal of capitalist time and space is at once obvious and elliptical, offering clearly transgressive images but little overt polemic.

Bastards seems at first glance to do the opposite: its world is so oppressive, so stifling, that although the polemic seems vivid, there is no space at all for resistance. More than her other work, this film insists on the repressive qualities of contemporary economic systems. In its claustrophobic interiority and inexorable narrative circling of catastrophe, *Bastards* functions as a chamber piece on the family as repressive state apparatus, drawing out inexorably the intimacies of economic, sexual, and familial exploitation. Is there resistance in the mere visualising of oppression? Of course, such labour has played a central role in the history of political cinemas, but *Bastards* does something other than rendering visible the violence of social relations. More than simply playing out a morality tale about patriarchal violence, the film reimagines that violence in gestural form. In Walter Benjamin's reading of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, gesture works "not to illustrate or advance the action but, on the contrary, to interrupt it: not only the action of others but also the action of one's own" (1998, 3-4.) For Benjamin, "the

interrupting of action is one of the principal concerns of epic theatre” (3) and *Bastards* deploys a mode of interruptive gesture to default on the expected pathways of its investigative narrative. If we can adapt the theory of epic theatre for thinking the conditions of contemporary visual culture, gesture might offer a way of thinking how cinema figures a resistance in formal terms to capitalist structures.

Bastards takes all the cinematic gestures of film noir and deracinates them: It self-consciously stages the cinematic gestures of film noir—point a gun, try to save the femme fatale—but these are cut short unceremoniously and fail to achieve their objectives. *Bastards* was widely compared in the press to *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), from *Film Comment*’s ambivalent review (September 2013) to the *Telegraph*’s rather more enthusiastic account (February 13, 2014). Both films are self-conscious neo-noirs about incest and both are organised around a father-daughter scene that provides a depressing climax. The references are vivid but the comparison highlights also how Denis’ politics of interruption breaks noir’s gestures down further than Polanski’s 1970s pessimism. In *Chinatown* there is a space into which all the bad things go, which is named as Chinatown. It is a metaphor, of course, whose true scope radiates across Los Angeles, but it functions within the film as both a conceptual and actual space of horror. “Forget it, Jake, it’s Chinatown.” But in *Bastards*, the hero can’t walk off and forget it because that space is the whole diegesis. There is no comfort in a strong male detective figure, because Marco’s heroic gesture of crossing the ocean to save his family not only leads to his abrupt death but ends in a more systemic collapse of the narrative world. The spectator’s position is fatally compromised when Marco is shot—before this point, we know exactly what he knows but the final scenes become unmoored from a specific

subjectivity. Even point of view structures are interrupted and our perspective breaks down completely as we are left with only the position of bastards through whom to view the key evidence.

This interruption of investigative knowledge is characteristic of the film's fragmentary narration, and it foregrounds resistance less as an insurrectionary practice and more, like electrical resistance, as a slowing or thwarting of the normal circuitry of power. Thus, although we find out a lot about Justine's life and death by the end of the film, it is never entirely clear what happened and why. For Benjamin, gesture's interrupted action puts the whole into a state of living flux and *Bastards* produces a similarly dialectical relation between image and totality. At once starkly obvious and resolutely opaque, *Bastards* is organised around a principal of interruption and breakdown. Of course, such attenuated, ambiguous and fragmentary narration is typical of both Denis and art cinema more broadly. Janet Bergstrom has described Denis' narration in terms of a "mise-en-scene of fragmentation" (2003, 71) in which narrative gaps are often left open and opacity forms a principle. Nonetheless, here the deracination of meaning is resolutely economic and the interruptive value of the gesture ties material film bodies to the invisible forces of patriarchal capitalism. Thus, concepts of debt and its effects organise the most significant gestures in the film. Marco feels indebted to his family for allowing him to sell out his share in the family business and go to sea. He sees it as his duty to pay them back, as he has escaped his debts and feels guilty enough to come home. But the morality that he always knew was suspect (that's why he left) proves to be bankrupt. The family he thought he was indebted to are in fact bastards, monsters of capital, and the woman he attempted to free kills him instead of her oppressor. The

economic calculus of his heroism is interrupted and his dutiful repayment of debt becomes void of meaning. Instead of repayment and harmony there is only collapse and the utter destruction of social bonds.

Lindon's world-weary masculinity provides a perfect vessel with which to register an older model of action in the world, now unable to exert any force. For Denis, the actor's body can bring into focus the film's more diffuse articulation of gender, power, capital, by condensing in gestural form their forces and effects on the subject. Shaviro describes a character in *Boarding Gate* (Assayas, 2007) who "registers in her body all the transactions and exchanges – monetary and otherwise – that flow through her and define the space around her. And she then relays these forces to us, in the form of her expressions, her bodily postures, and her movements and gestures." (59) If Michel Subor registers in his physicality the predatory forces of global capital, then Lola Créton's performance as Justine relays the flows of that system's violence and hostility, and the sheer impossibility of containing them and remaining a person in the world. Interruption becomes an ultimate gesture of refusal for Justine, whose act of resistance is to drive her car into a tree. She declines to be part of the world that has violated her subjectivity, and although her hallucinatory death ride is hardly political for the character, the film constructs her act not as patriarchal punishment but as a seductive sensation of escape, a *jouissance* of refusal.

In focusing on the bastard and his victims, *Bastards* provides a uniquely visceral insight into the contemporary world. The utter breakdown of sociality that the spectator is left with in the film's closing scene is of course a symptom of contemporary capitalism. To return to Schwartz, "Disintegration replaces belonging, not only within classes, but

within the whole to which classes belong. Hostis no longer refers to an individual or collective enemy, but to the proliferation of hostilities as relations between forms of life.” The commitment of *Bastards* to claustrophobic oppression, breakdown and negation stages this hostility and the foreclosing of political or even ethical action that comes with it. However, it also poses a form of resistance to the bastards of its title, not least in the opportunity it provides for the spectator to experience an affective response that adds anger to horror. In naming the film *Bastards*, Denis doesn’t only imagine the social as a looming space of hostility – she conjures a subject position from which we can hate it. Laporte is a bastard because someone calls him a bastard—the word performatively creates not only its object but a subject, who sees bastardliness and who is willing to curse it. That position is necessarily resistant, and as much as the film figures the hostility of contemporary capitalism, it also demands that we imagine the space from which this hostility can be seen and, we might hope, more effectively refused.